

Charles-Louis Montesquieu

- Montesquieu was born in Bordeaux, France, in 1689 to a wealthy family.
- Despite his family's wealth, he was placed in the care of a poor family during his childhood. He later went to college and studied science and history. He became a lawyer in the local government.
- When his father died, Montesquieu was placed under the care of his uncle, Baron de Montesquieu. When the Baron died, he left Montesquieu his enormous fortune as well as his title of Baron.
- Later Montesquieu began to study the laws, customs, and governments of the countries of Europe.
- He first gained fame in 1721 with his work *Persian Letters*, which criticized the lifestyle and liberties of the wealthy French as well as the church.
- However, Montesquieu's book *On the Spirit of Laws*, published in 1748, was his most famous work. It outlined his ideas on how government would work best,
- Montesquieu believed that all things were made up of rules or laws that never changed. He set out to study these laws scientifically with the hope that knowledge of the laws of government would reduce the problems of society and improve human life.
- According to Montesquieu, there were three types of government:
 - A monarchy (ruled by a king or queen)
 - A republic (ruled by an elected leader)
 - A despotism (ruled by a dictator)
- Montesquieu believed that a government that was elected by the people was the best form of government.
 - He did, however, believe that the success of a democracy – a government in which the people have the power – depended upon maintaining the right *balance* of power.
- Montesquieu argued that the best government would be one in which power was balanced among three groups of officials. He thought England – which divided power between the king (who enforced laws), Parliament (which made laws), and the judges of the English courts (who interpreted laws) – was a good model of this.
 - He called the idea of dividing government into three branched the “separation of powers”.
- He thought it was most important to create separate branches of government with *equal* but *different* powers. That way, the government would avoid placing too much power with one individual or group of individuals.
 - According to him, each branch of government could limit the power of the other two branches. Therefore, no branch of the government could threaten the freedom of the people
- His ideas about separation of powers became the basis for the United States Constitution
- Despite, Montesquieu's belief in the principles of a democracy, he did not feel that all people were equal. He approved of slavery. He also thought that women were weaker than men were and that they had to obey the commands of their husband. However, he also felt that women did have the ability to govern. Montesquieu argued that women were too weak to be in control at home, but that their calmness and gentleness would be helpful qualities in making decisions in government.
- Montesquieu died of a fever in Paris on February 10, 1755. Although he had fathered two daughters and a son with his wife, he had been devoted to his work.
 - Ironically, he had left his wife in charge of their household during his travels.